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Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring

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***Civil resistance in the Arab Spring: triumphs and disasters.* By Adam Roberts, Michael J. Willis, Rory McCarthy and Timothy Garton Ash; Oxford; Oxford University Press; 2016; 360 pages; £25 hardback; ISBN: 9780198749028; available as ebook**

The Arab Spring's uneven legacies attest to the ambiguous role of civil resistance in political life in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. Seven years since Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation sent a wave of protest across the region, regime figureheads have fallen in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, political or economic concessions have been made in Jordan, Morocco, Algeria and Oman, and sharp, violent repressions felt in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Syria. Such diversity of outcomes demonstrates that civil resistance movements have varying levels of success in achieving their goals. Outcomes are seldom predicted accurately. What, then, determines outcomes of civil resistance movements?

In response to this question, *Civil resistance in the Arab Spring* contends that the successes of civil resistance movements are determined by 'a society's prevailing conditions' which serve to support or hamper activities, strategies and tactics. Two adverse conditions stand out (1) repression by the regime; (2) the absence of the preconditions for peaceful transition to a stable and pluralist order (p. 319). Adam Roberts and his collaborators (including Michael Willis, Rory McCarthy and Timothy Garton Ash) contend that this approach modifies prevailing wisdom in the study of civil resistance which traditionally emphasizes the importance of the 'method of struggle' in determining outcomes for civil resistance movements. For example, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's influential mixed-methods study of civil resistance campaigns in Iran, Palestine, Burma and the Philippines associates positive outcomes with nonviolent methods of struggle. Non-violent resistance campaigns are 'nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts' (*Why civil resistance works: the strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*, 2011, 7). In making the distinction between non-violent and violent methods of struggle, this line of argument equates violence with failure and non-violence with success. Roberts & Co. counter that the experience of the Arab Spring begs the question, when facing the reconstruction of constitutional order, does either approach have a chance for success?

Ten rich empirical chapters, written by contributors from the worlds of academia, policy and journalism (including Chibli Mallat, Edward Mortimer, Michael Willis, M. Cherif Bassiouni, Elham Fakra, George Joffé, Helen Lackner, Jacob Amis, Driss Magraoui, Raymond Hinnebusch, Omar Imady, Tina Zintl and Wendy Pearlman) note how prevailing conditions

shaped outcomes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, Syria and Palestine since 2011. For example, the descent of Syria's uprising into violence and civil war, can be explained in part by its own experience of sectarian violence since the 1980s (p. 237). The regime's willingness to use lethal force to break protest momentum left Syrians unable to mount protests on the scale of those seen in Egypt (p. 229). In sharp contrast, security officials in Jordan opted to avoid the use of lethal force, preferring instead a 'skillful combination of permissive and punitive responses' to the mass rallies and sit-ins (p. 189). The 2013 parliamentary elections that followed unsurprisingly endorsed the palace-led approach to surface reforms but Jordanian protestors successfully pushed at the widely accepted boundaries of public space. State responses to peaceful protestors trying to expand public space further in Bahrain, for example, were less restrained opting for security crackdowns in the early stages of gatherings at the Pearl Roundabout. As rights and freedoms have seen reversals rather than extensions, engaging in peaceful civil resistance has proved costly for many Bahrainis (p. 115).

The final word on the fate of the Arab Spring falls to the concluding chapter which offers a succinct account of external and international influences (including the United States, the UN Security Council, NATO and Russia). This will likely appeal to those interested in issues surrounding intervention in general; the resilience of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine in particular. Ultimately, though outside support may be necessary to 'help level the playing field between government and opposition' (p. 323) Roberts & Co. assert that the fate of the Arab Spring rested on civil resisters' failure to acknowledge the risk and danger involved in building a new constitutional order – 'when civil resisters call for the fall of the regime, but fail to address these issues, they become part of the problem.' (p. 324).

Written in an engaging and accessible style, *Civil resistance in the Arab Spring* should be of interest to a wide readership including scholars, practitioners and students of the Middle East working in a range of fields.

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